

# Hikikomori- a Generation in Crisis

Investigations into the phenomenon of acute social withdrawal in  
Japan

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## Abstract

This paper is focused on acute social withdrawal in Japan, popularly referred to as the hikikomori phenomenon. I aim to investigate and analyse the discourse on hikikomori in the socio- historical context of post- bubble Japan. I argue that the 90s or the ‘lost decade’ of Japan plays a major part as the context in which hikikomori was constituted as a unique phenomenon of Japan and as a part of a larger social crisis.

*To my family, friends and Miki*

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# Chapter 1- Introduction

*Hiroyuki Arai, a 24 year old man experienced bullying during elementary and junior high school which in turn made the initially calm and silent boy unable to verbally communicate at all. At school he was completely mute, and the only place where he could express himself was at home. Already in second grade he expressed suicidal thoughts. The bullying he experienced everyday at school made him take out his frustrations on his parents in the form of violence.*

*He eventually decided to quit school, and this decision was supported by his mother. Gradually it became more difficult for him to venture outside. After one year he got “a little sick” as he calls it. Not sick as in fed up, but as in feeling a highly irrational and shattering fear of lightning. This fear made him use ear plugs even on clear, sunny days. If the weather turned bad and there actually was lightning, he became horrified and broke out in a cold sweat. This behaviour lasted for a while, but was soon replaced by a different one. This time the behaviour turned obsessive compulsive: He needed to check if the electricity was properly turned off at least 10- 20 times in a short period of time. Then he started to obsess over his writing, erasing and rewriting the smallest error over and over. These compulsions naturally became an obstacle for his everyday life.*

Hiroyuki has experienced extreme social withdrawal in Japan- popularly referred to as *hikikomori*. His story serves as an example of how extreme social withdrawal can be experienced. The story is based on an interview with this particular sufferer. Each chapter in this paper will begin with the continued story of Hiroyuki.

## 1.1- Background

The hikikomori sufferers are commonly understood to be relatively young people in their 20s or 30s who isolate themselves at home, avoiding social interaction outside their families. They are financially dependant on their parents as they have no means of making an income for themselves. In English the condition is known as *social withdrawal syndrome* or *acute social withdrawal*. It is viewed as an extreme state of social isolation, and by many a disorder specific to the culture of Japan which can last for several years.

Brought to the attention of the Japanese public in 1999 by linkage to a series of high profile crimes where recluses had performed acts of violence or murder (Ogino2004:121), the hikikomori syndrome of social isolation is considered a recent phenomenon in Japan. The leading expert on the hikikomori, psychologist Tamaki Saito gave name to the condition in his book published in 1998- *hikikomori as a social phenomenon- unending/ongoing adolescence*.

Saito was allegedly the first to present the widely accepted estimate of 1 million hikikomori, roughly 1% of Japans population. (Zielenziger 2006:60; Rees, 2002 b; Beech, 2003; Watts, 2002) and this high number boosted attention and increased concern among the public. When looking through Saito's (1998:4) book he casually projects a number of "*hundreds of thousands*" hikikomori in a much less assertive way than some sources have implied. The media sources also rarely refer to where and when he has projected the infamous number of one million. Nevertheless, the number has been almost uncritically accepted since its occurrence in the late nineties.

In a television programme aired in 2008 the KHJ support network<sup>1</sup>, a non profit, nationwide organization for parents of hikikomori sufferers presented their own estimate of 1.636 000 socially withdrawn people, and that the average age of sufferers had passed 30 (Youtube.com, 2008). A slightly outdated research report from 2003 by The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare presents a less alarming number. It reported 14 069 cases throughout Japan (Ogino 2004:122).

The diverging numbers calls for examination. One could argue that it might be in the interest of the Government to downplay the numbers while experts and support/interest groups may exaggerate in order to bring attention and support to their cause. A high estimate of sufferers helps legitimize a higher number of support groups. Saito's 1% has led to what researcher Kaneko (2006:234) refers to as the 'hikikomori industry' which consist of over 100 support groups for hikikomori throughout Japan and a relatively high number of publications<sup>2</sup> by various experts. The divergence could also be an indicator of definition problems as I intend to investigate further. Nevertheless, I believe that a number of 14 000 socially withdrawn still justifies further research into the phenomenon considering the attention it has received.

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<sup>1</sup> *Zenkoku Hikikomori KHJ Oya no Kai* is the Japanese name of the organization and translates as "The National Assembly of Hikikomori Parents KHJ". I have decided to dub this as the KHJ support network or just KHJ.

<sup>2</sup> Self-help books etc.

Masayuki Okuyama is the founder of the KHJ support network. Their aim, according to their website, is to share information, demand support from the authorities and create an arena for the parents who wish to deal with the problem (KHJ, 2001b). In 1999 Okuyama banded together hikikomori support groups in Saitama prefecture<sup>3</sup>, and the organization included by 2003 close to 5000 families spread over 36 prefectures (Shimoyachi, 2003). Okuyama shared his own story in which he himself had experienced the problems connected to social withdrawal through his 28 year old son who had isolated himself in the family home since he was fifteen years old. The boy eventually became violent, forcing his parents to move to an apartment nearby (Rees 2002a).

There are similar stories, in which the extreme tension between parents and hikikomori has escalated to violence and even murder. A man reportedly came out from a 20 year long span of recluse and strangled his parents, a 19-year old clubbed his parents to death with a dumbbell (Lewis, 2004), and a 28 year old man killed his parents and sister because he felt they were robbing his space (Japan Times, 2004). There are also examples in which reported recluses vent their frustrations in public. A 17 year old hijacked a bus and stabbed one of the passengers to death in 2000, and this incident is said to be the first that made the public associate hikikomori with violence and homicide (Watts, 2002). Other high profile crimes that occurred during the 90s and early 2000 have been connected to the syndrome through confessions of the criminals who reported withdrawal from social life (Ogino 2004:121). This further boosted the attention around the phenomenon both within Japan, and abroad. There are claims that the crimes have stigmatized the hikikomori, and Kaneko (2006:235) notes that there is also some stigma attached to the families of the withdrawn as they are considered one of the causes of the social withdrawal.

The individuals who were reported as hikikomori in 1999 had already been in isolation for several years so it is difficult to say exactly when and if this “trend” had a beginning. There is however a beginning to the trend where the media uses what Krysinska (2006:17) refers to as a “*sensationalizing, generalizing and simplifying approach to introducing the (hikikomori) problem,*” and there is also a tendency to view the hikikomori phenomenon as a result of a larger social crisis in a ‘fear mongering’ manner. I believe this kind of approach has its roots

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<sup>3</sup> A part of the Greater Tokyo Area.

in the 90's as I intend to discuss in this paper. One could say that the year 1999 was the birth of how the media started to portray hikikomori as a social phenomenon unique to Japan with alarming future implications for the Japanese society.

## **1.2- Main argument**

Japanese experts have provided various theories, often heavily influenced by cultural explanations, as for why this phenomenon occurs. Many journalists have taken advantage of western observers' stereotypic image of Japanese society and culture and further nourished the assumption that hikikomori is specific or bound to the unique culture of Japan. There is also a conflict within the discourse as the various support networks aim to get official recognition of hikikomori as a pathology, while the officials are reluctant to properly define the problem.

The inconsistency around the definition of hikikomori as a syndrome, a disease or a symptom or none of the above have created a multi- faceted and intense discourse around this mysterious phenomenon in which a definite answer or solution to the problem has yet to be discovered. There is little doubt that the state of acute social withdrawal exists, but why has it received so much attention in Japan as a social malaise? I argue that it is only in the historical context of post- bubble Japan that one can really begin to understand the emergence of the hikikomori phenomenon. I wish to identify various strands of arguments in the various discourses and evaluate the impact they have had on the public opinion. I also aim to assess some of the positive and negative effects the discourses have had on the practical level of finding a solution to the hikikomori problem.

## **1.3- Research Question**

In what way and why have the discourse on hikikomori contributed to the public perception of the phenomenon as a social malaise culturally specific and unique to Japan?

## **1.4- Research method**

#### 1.4.1- Discourse

Discourse has been defined as spoken interaction of all forms, and written texts of all kinds (Neumann 2002:22) and the power of discourse lies in that it both constitute and interpret reality. Foucault has said about discourses that they are “*practises that systematically form the objects of which they speak*” and Bartelson defines discourse as “*a system for the formation of statements*” (Quoted in Neumann 2002:17). In the case of the various discourses on hikikomori they function as a system that has allowed the formation of statements on this particular phenomenon, and the statements have formed hikikomori into an object observers perceive as unique to Japan.

To further clarify the meaning of ‘object’ in discourse one could include Foucault’s view of objects as “*(...) entities which particular disciplines or sciences recognize within their fields of interest, and which they take as targets for investigation*” (Quoted in Fairclough 1992:41). Based on Foucault’s theories on ‘the formation of objects’ in discourse, Fairclough (1992:41) notes in a summary that “*(...) the ‘objects’ of discourse are constituted and transformed in discourse, rather than existing independently and simply being referred to or talked about in a particular discourse.*” Various psychiatrists and psychologists have recognized hikikomori as an entity belonging to their field of interest and their views have further transformed the phenomenon into a unique and strange social disorder of Japan.

#### 1.4.2- Nihonjinron in discourse

The fact that discourses constitute and form objects or phenomenon is obvious, but there is a more subtle factor that tends to shape discourse on various Japanese phenomenon. This is the pervasiveness of something popularly referred to as *nihonjinron*. Nihonjinron means “*theories on the Japanese*”. The term describes texts, Japanese or foreign, focusing on the uniqueness of the Japanese race and their national and cultural identity by comparison with foreign countries.

*“Books on nihonjinron typically contain the following five premises:*

*Uniqueness: Japan, its people, culture, ways of thinking, social behaviour, language, etc., are unique  
This uniqueness of the Japanese is rooted in the distinctive characteristics of the Japanese race or ethnos*



Ahistorical essentialism: *The peculiarities of the Japanese remain unaltered essentially throughout history, and indeed, it is often asserted, are derived from a prehistorical world*

Homogeneity: *The Japanese are homogeneous as a people, race, or ethnic community*

Language: *The Japanese language contains words and phrases that cannot be adequately translated into other languages, demonstrating the uniqueness of the Japanese race.”*

(Wikipedia, 2009a)

Homogeneity is often explained historically as the country was isolated by the Tokugawa shogunate from the rest of the world during the *sakoku*- [locked country], and still is in the sense that it is a *shimaguni*- [island country] and therefore not exposed to other cultures in the same way as other industrialized countries. These views have been strongly influenced by *nihonjinron* texts. Typical variables covered by *nihonjinron* literature are for example the uniqueness of Japanese culture and society, and different values and thought patterns consistent in the Japanese mentality. Usual conceptions about Japan are that there is a strong prevalence of consensus, conformity and group mentality.

In the eighties the theories were often utilized in a positive sense to explain the economic success of Japan (Yoneyama 2006:19). Burgess (2004) notes that “*In the 1990s, perhaps partly due to the recession, interest in Nihonjinron subsided somewhat*”, But that it still appears remarkably resilient and that “*(...) the view that Japan comprises an extremely homogeneous culture is still 'dominant and pervasive'*” Some of the examples provided in this paper exhibits that this pervasiveness can be observed in the hikikomori discourse through journalists and experts’ reference to culturally specific causes of the phenomenon. There is however a marked difference in the use of *nihonjinron* theories in hikikomori discourse compared to the *nihonjinron* theories used during the miracle economy. In the hikikomori discourse, the culture that has cultivated this new phenomenon is viewed as a negative factor.

Compared to the massive focus on culture there is surprisingly little or no focus on biological and individual psychological factors in the various discourses. This can partly be explained due to a dominating functionalist approach in Japanese and English discourse on Japan where “*society is regarded as an entity which exists in its own right, individuals are seen only in terms of the role they play in fulfilling the ‘needs’ and ‘purposes’ of the social whole.*” (Yoneyama 2006:19). Such a holistic view supports the notion that the uniqueness of Japan is based on independent social and cultural variables that can not be changed. In this respect it is important to differentiate between the crude *nihonjinron* type of arguments and the more

professional focus upon cultural factors that may have contributed to the emergence of the phenomenon. The focus could also in large part be ascribed to the fact that the discourses on this phenomenon are dominated by views constituted by discourses on the grass- root level. I have dubbed these discourses as the media discourse, the experts' discourse and the citizens' discourse (More on these below).

In this paper I argue that the constituted object of 'social withdrawal' has transformed into the object of 'hikikomori' due to strong influence by media, experts' and citizens' discourse, in which nihonjinron theorizing and holistic, functionalist perspectives are pervasive. In other words, discourse has transformed the universal act of social withdrawal into the culturally unique Japanese phenomenon hikikomori. To answer my research question I intend to explore why, and how the discourse has developed in a specific direction where culture specific generalisations around causes of social withdrawal in Japan has been widely accepted and utilized by leading advocates of various discourses.

#### **1.4.3- Discourse model**

I have identified four discourses with their leading advocates as the most influential interpreters of the hikikomori phenomenon and included them in a discourse model. These constitute what I refer to as the 'hikikomori discourse' in this paper.

##### Experts' discourse

Leading advocate: Saito, Hattori, Isobe, Kawai

Important media: news media, medical columns, medical reports, brochures, "self help"-books, surveys

Labelling: *syakaiteki hikikomori*, hikikomori

Possible social field: health stations, hikikomori rehab centres, medical forums

General support: psychiatrists, medical practitioners, therapists, psychologists

Concerns: sufferers, family of sufferers, the medical society in general

Hikikomori as: a symptom of a disorder caused by cultural factors unique to Japan.

##### Media discourse

Leading advocate: Zielenziger, Rees

Important media: all news media, paper or web editions, TV, books

Labelling: hikikomori, acute/extreme social withdrawal syndrome, recluse, hermit  
Possible social field: TV, newspapers, internet  
General support: journalists  
Concerns: people in general, relatives, friends and neighbours of hikikomori  
Hikikomori as: a social disease, a unique Japanese phenomenon, a resistance towards Japanese society

### Citizens' discourse

Leading advocate: Okuyama, parents of hikikomori, KHJ, New Start and other hikikomori related organizations  
Important media: internet, pamphlets, homepages  
Labelling: hikikomori  
Possible social field: meetings, seminars, newsletters  
General support: parents of hikikomori, volunteers, the support industry, some therapists, rehabilitated hikikomori  
Concerns: parents of hikikomori and the sufferer in question  
Hikikomori as: pathology, a social disease

### Official discourse

Leading advocate: The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare  
Important media: official internet pages, reports and surveys  
Labelling: hikikomori  
Possible social field: media, official debates  
General support: the Government  
Concerns: researchers and medical institutions, statistics, governmental organs  
Hikikomori as: a social phenomenon, social withdrawal surpassing 6 months <sup>4</sup>

One could argue that media is not a discourse in itself, but rather a presenter of, or the sum of various discourses. In the case of hikikomori, the media has had a strong influence on general perception of social withdrawal through popularization of the term 'hikikomori'. Media interprets what the experts believe to be the main causes of hikikomori and in many cases functions as a conveyer of information to the public. It is also a well know fact that media is

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<sup>4</sup> The format of this model is based on Neumann's (2002:67- 68) example of a discourse model, and Yoneyama's (1999:192, table 8.2) discourse model on tōkōkyōhi.

an important former of public opinion. I therefore argue that it is justifiable to view media as a discourse in this paper.

My main argument for separating the various discourses lies mainly in what I assume to be the motivation, or intention of the leading advocates. What is important to note is that the various discourses are interconnected and has had great influence on each other, and that there are few clearly defined disagreements around causes of the phenomenon. It is especially important to note that the official discourse is in large part inspired by the grass- root level<sup>5</sup> discourses which made the phenomenon visible to the public. Some readers may have noticed that this model is short and highly selective, but I still believe it can be useful in providing a simple overview of the various discourses, its advocates and their views. I have chosen not to categorize researchers in this model, but rather utilize their views as objective observers of the various discourses. Researchers are in fact an important part of discourse, but those works I have cited have not been part of the current construct of hikikomori as a Japanese phenomenon.

#### **1.4.4- Sources**

In order to answer my research question I made myself familiar with the research and academic works on the hikikomori phenomenon.

I gathered additional secondary and primary sources from academic literature in the form of books and electronic articles. Research on hikikomori is fairly limited and the actual number of research publications is small. Most studies are only available as electronic publications. A simple search on google.com using “hikikomori” as search word brings up a total of 848 000 hits<sup>6</sup>. A search on Google.co.jp<sup>7</sup> using the search word “引きこもり”<sup>8</sup> results in 3 420 000 hits so there is quite a few sites related to the subject. I have collected information from Japanese and international newspapers and magazines, I have also accessed documentaries and TV-specials posted on Youtube.com.

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<sup>5</sup> Grass- root level meaning a level not orchestrated by traditional power structures.

<sup>6</sup> Per 18.3.09

<sup>7</sup> The Japanese version of google.com

<sup>8</sup> Hikikomori as it is written in Japanese. See glossary

At the outset I had a wide approach. All sources that had some mentioning of hikikomori were relevant, but I later tried to narrow it down to those who had specific quotes from central commentators, and that said something about Japanese society in relation to the phenomenon. Articles on criminal acts by hikikomori were also of interest. I actively chose not to focus too much on actual numbers and statistics as they are so often debated, but to the extent I have used numbers I have tried to cross- check them to the best of my ability.

Considering the level of attention hikikomori has received in both Japanese and international media, it is surprising that sociological or anthropological studies on the phenomenon are so few. This could indicate that the massive focus on culture has made it uninteresting for those researchers who lose interest once the term is considered ‘exotic’ (Hughes 1985:5).

Saito Tamaki is recognized as the leading expert on hikikomori. Others who are quoted by the media include: Psychotherapist Yuichi Hattori, Psychiatrist Ushio Isobe and youth researcher and sociologist Shinji Miyadai. Some of these professionals have also published their own works on hikikomori directed towards the public.

Leader of KHJ, Masayuki Okuyama has been a prominent figure in the citizens’ and media discourse. Foreign journalists and commentators include Michael Zielenziger, the first foreigner to publish a book on hikikomori and Phil Rees, journalist for the BBC who made the first documentary on the phenomenon in English. Some might argue that Zielenziger is a scholar, but would argue that it is justifiable to place him in the media discourse due to his somewhat popularizing approach. The renowned writer Ryu Murakami has contributed to the discourse in the form of a novel and an essay on the subject.<sup>9</sup>

Researchers whose objective work I have found particularly useful are Sachiko Kaneko, Tatsushi Ogino, Dorota Krysinska and Michael Dziesinski. All four have utilized statistics on hikikomori provided by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and made interesting remarks on various factors related to the phenomenon. Dan G. Blazer is another researcher whose comments on major depression I found useful in connection to my thesis on the hikikomori phenomenon. Researchers such as Ronald C. Simons and Charles C. Hughes also provided me with valuable argumentation in their studies on culture- bound syndromes.

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<sup>9</sup> The novel goes by the name of *Symbiosis Worm* and the essay *Japan’s Lost Generation* posted at TIMEasia. Com will be referred to later in this paper.

About references, I have chosen to use the name of various journalists in the actual text where this is specified e.g. (Name, year). When names are omitted, I have referred to the names of the actual newspaper where the article was found e.g. (Name of the paper, year). Publications were referred to by name of author, year and page number: (name year: page). When several articles or publications of one author from the same year have been referred, I have used letters a, b etc. to specify which article or publication: (name, year letter). Sources found on Youtube.com have been specified with year in the text. I have based the system used in this paper on the Harvard system of reference.

All Japanese to English translations are by me, and direct quotes can be found in their original form in the Appendix. There is also a glossary for those who wish to check the various terms I have used in this paper in its Japanese form.

In this paper I have mainly used written texts on hikikomori. An interview with a patient suffering from social withdrawal would have been a great contribution, but as readers might have realized, getting an interview with someone who will not leave their room would have proven difficult. If I was to continue research on this phenomenon, I would have tried to get hold of more primary sources such as expert interviews or interviews with rehabilitated hikikomori. However, this paper is a preliminary survey to be concluded within a limited space of time and with limited resources. In addition, the field one inevitably has to explore extensively when examining this phenomenon is that of medicine and medical anthropology which regrettably goes beyond my own direction of study.

## **Chapter 2- Social and historical context**

*At one point Hiroyuki's father got in some economic trouble and his siblings were sent to live with their grandparents. His father needed to stay at work so the only one he had social contact with was his mother. His erratic behaviour expanded. He started to seek loneliness. He had thoughts like- "Today I shall spend my day under the kitchen table", or "I am going to live in the bathroom for one whole day". This was around the time when he should have attended classes in first grade of high school. His mother moved out to live with the grandparents, but came around the house to leave food for him. Communication at this point*

*was by the form of notes if he needed something. When his mother came around he hid away in a corner. He could no longer watch or listen to people even on the TV or on the radio. Strangely, he could still listen to music tapes and watch anime so long as it had no real people in it. He had finally lost all connections with the outside world.*

## **2.1- What is hikikomori?**

The situation differs from each household, but the stereotypical image of a hikikomori is as follows: The individual is nocturnal- sleeps during the day, wakes up at night. He/she spends their time on the internet, playing TV- games or reading comics. Meals are provided by the mother of the household. She leaves it outside his/her door for them to retrieve when no one is looking. His/her room is littered with plastic bags filled with garbage and faeces and bottles of urine. The windows are duct taped to keep the sun out. The hikikomori are depicted as vampiric characters, shunning the sun, and if leaving the room at all does so discretely, late at night in order to buy snacks or comics at the neighbourhoods 24hour- open marts. The hikikomori are the shame of the family, parasitic and sometimes violent towards his/her benefactors. Little exposure to fresh air and sun leaves them pale and unhealthy- looking. Combined with the lack of personal hygiene and grooming, those who have no personal experience with the phenomenon are left with an unflattering mental image of the hikikomori.

The Japanese word hikikomori (引きこもり) consists of two verbs. One is *hiku* which means pull/withdraw, and *komoru* meaning closing up/in. It is a term describing the state of an individual who withdraws from society for a longer period of time with little, or no social contact. In discourse the term can describe the individual (e.g. I am a hikikomori or the hikikomori) as well as the phenomenon (e.g. He suffers from hikikomori). Researcher Ogino (2004) chooses to describe the sufferer as ‘hikikomorian’. English texts utilize the word ‘hikikomori’ rather than ‘social withdrawal’. This is important to note as an unfamiliar and exotic word is more likely to attract attention to this as a mystical phenomenon, and it brings an air of authenticity to the piece. The usage of the word also has the effect that it enhances ‘hikikomori’ as something slightly different and specifically Japanese compared to ‘social withdrawal’ which is a relatively familiar English term. By now, hikikomori has by general

approval transformed into a noun that is self- sustained in people's perception, even if it does not exist as a noun in a Japanese dictionary<sup>10</sup>.

### **2.1.1- Official definition**

The hikikomori cannot sustain social connections, go to school or work. People who stay locked up in their rooms for more than 6 months in one stretch are classified as hikikomori by official standards. The definition used by The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare consists of three points:

**1. Hikikomori is not a name of a disease.**

**2. The period of withdrawal is six months or more.**

**3 Hikikomori are not diagnosed as those who suffer from mental illness or mental retardation.**

(Ogino 2004:121).

Commentators from the various discourses usually stick to this definition as a basis, but often include their own interpretations and observations to explain the phenomenon. Psychologist Saito (1998:6) notes that: "*hikikomori is not the name of a disease, but a symptom*" and that "*according to the field of psychology one is not supposed to set a diagnosis from hikikomori, but rather the symptoms that eventually comes to accompany it.*" One could argue that the use of the term 'syndrome' in connection with hikikomori is more or less correct since the term refers to clinically recognizable pattern of symptoms or behaviours occurring together<sup>11</sup> (Wikipedia, 2009b). The use of the term syndrome is however very inconsistent in the various discourses. Probably because such usage would conflict with the first point in the official definition, as 'syndrome' would indicate that the condition is an illness to be treated by experts (Yoneyama 1999:193).

### **2.1.2- Related pathologies**

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<sup>10</sup> It exists as a verb. *Hikikomoru*- [to stay indoors or retire].

<sup>11</sup> Sleeping disorders, anxiety, phobias and obsessive compulsive behaviour etc.



Is hikikomori simply a local variation of recognized western disorders, or is it specific to the Japanese culture?

According to some media sources Western psychologists have compared the hikikomori with mental disorders such as: agoraphobia, dissociative personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (Shimoyachi, 2003), extreme social anxiety, Aspergers syndrome (Kary, 2003), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) etc.

The KHJ support network has utilized the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems<sup>12</sup> from the homepage of World Health Organization. From the chapter containing mental and behavioural disorders, KHJ has recognized 7 disorders in which hikikomori are connected. These are: Phobic anxiety disorders (agoraphobia, social phobia etc.), other anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorders, reaction to severe stress and adjustment disorders, Dissociative [conversion] disorders, somatoform disorders, other neurotic disorders and specific personality disorders. (KHJ, 2001a)

Journalist Zielenziger (2006:17) argues that if psychiatrists used Western standards to diagnose mental disorders on hikikomori, for example the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual<sup>13</sup>, their symptoms cannot be attributed to any psychiatric ailment. This is worth noting as there is a history of discussion and controversy around the ethnocentric category of ‘culture- bound psychiatric syndromes’ in the psychiatric field. This category has been used to describe culturally specific phenomena that occur outside the Western cosmopolitan society and is therefore not integrated into recognized classifications of disease such as DSM (Simons 1985:25; Hughes 1985:5).

Dr. Hughes, a professor in the field of anthropology note in the introduction to his glossary of ‘culture- bound’ syndromes that *“some patterns of disorder become stereotyped and so extreme- so obviously displaying “sick” symptoms- that they are socially recognized and even named.”* He further says that *“if the behaviour is sufficiently striking and deviant from normal expectations, it seems a truism that people in any group will have some language by which they refer to the behaviour,”*(Hughes 1985:472). In this respect it is natural that the Japanese have adapted the ‘hikikomori’ label. What is more notable though, is that the Western media

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<sup>12</sup> ICD 10

<sup>13</sup> DSM IV

have also adapted the same label- an act suggesting that the phenomenon is so “foreign”, strange or bizarre from a Western point of view that it is given a reified status as a culture-bound syndrome even if it in theory could be explained through the use of categories found in versions of the ICD or DSM (1985: 469).

### **2.1.3- Cultural explanations**

Japanese experts tend to focus less on psychiatric illnesses and more on cultural factors when commenting the phenomenon through mass media. It is common to see quotes from psychiatrists and psychologists where they interpret the phenomenon as a result of traditional Japanese culture (Shimoyachi, 2003). This has the effect that it constitutes hikikomori as a unique, culturally bound Japanese phenomenon. Several journalists note that both Japanese and Western psychiatrists claim that this is a recently observed social disorder that does not exist outside of Japan (Kary, 2003; Rees 2002; Zielenziger 2006:17).

Observers from the Western medical field have also commented on the cultural factor: Psychologist David Kupfer points out that "*in Japan, the pressure to succeed is a unique cultural source of trauma,*" (Kary, 2003). For Kupfer it is the pressure connected to social demands unique to Japan that causes youth to draw back from society. Another psychologist, Dr. Henry Grubb says that "*young people the world over fear school or suffer agoraphobia, but hikikomori is a specific condition that doesn't exist elsewhere*" (Rees, 2002b). The term ‘culture- bound’ implies exactly this; that the syndrome or disorder in question is restricted to the particular setting of which it was first discovered (Hughes 1985:9)

Those who most rampantly seek to explain the phenomenon through culture seem to be various journalists. A potentially dangerous social disorder, which may have been induced by Japanese society and culture have made the headlines of both Japanese and international press. Here are some of the more extreme examples from international press: “Hikikomori violence” (Rees, 2002a), “Family hermits turn killer” (Lewis, 2004), “Japan’s recluses emerge and start killing” (Ryall, 2008).

The simplicity of the definition provided by officials has made it impossible for Western observers to categorize hikikomori as a pathologic state by the use of our official systems of

diagnosis, and one could argue that this has caused a general acquiescence of this as a unique Japanese condition. Moreover, one could argue that the general stereotypic conception of Japan as weird and mystical has made it more tempting for the International media to separate hikikomori from social withdrawal as it occurs in other societies.

The official definition tells us more what hikikomori is not rather than what it is. One is tempted to ask if it is a real illness or a disease. Simons (1985:27) argue that it is useless to debate whether any syndrome is a “real disease” or not. What he sees as useful is rather to ask what in each syndrome the specific contribution of biology, culture and individual psychology may be. Since individual psychology and biology is less transparent, culture gets a large part of the focus in public debate. Simons (1985:31) also argue that “*In the case of the culture-bound syndromes the similarities will often be biological and the differences cultural*”. But is it then correct to assume that hikikomori is unique to the Japanese culture?

## **2.2- Social withdrawal in other countries**

There are some accounts of phenomenon similar to hikikomori occurring in other parts of the world. In the United Kingdom several people responded to Phil Rees BBC broadcasted documentary on hikikomori. Many of the responses were from parents claiming that they had observed social withdrawal symptoms in their own children (Krysinska 2006:13). There have also been reports of social withdrawal syndrome occurring in South Korea and Hong Kong. In South Korea for example, Zielenziger (2006:223- 224) writes of something called *wittori*- [*introverted social loners*] who has similar symptoms as hikikomori only much less aggressive. The same author implies that self- seclusion in South- Korea is limited because of compulsory military duty starting from age 18. Psychologist Saito (ESRI, 2005) also notes that “*Withdrawal is not limited to Japan; it is growing in South Korea as well*” According to a report done in 2007 by an organization called Hong Kong Christian Service 18,500 people between the ages 10-24 were estimated as socially withdrawn in Hong Kong (Poon, 2007).

By curiosity, I looked for a similar phenomenon in my own country, Norway, and found that according to a survey approximately 2% <sup>14</sup> of the grown Norwegian population were completely isolated socially, twice the estimated percentage of Japan. From what I could

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<sup>14</sup> 70 000 people at the time of the publication.

interpret from this article there was no need to panic since this percentage had not changed significantly during the last 20- 30 years. The definition of a socially isolated person in this survey was that they were between ages 16-79; they lived alone and had no weekly face to face contact with close friends or family (Barstad, 2004).

Why has there been no sense of crisis regarding this issue in Norway, South Korea, United Kingdom and Hong Kong? Why is there virtually no research available to the public?

There does not seem to be any significant linkage to social withdrawal or mental illness as a sign of a larger social crisis in any of these countries, at least not in the international media picture. The lack of research and the fact that the sources I have used to find this information in large part could be viewed as questionable makes it difficult to deny any assumption that hikikomori might actually be culture- bound. The next step then would be to investigate what in Japanese society and culture is so unique that the behaviour of social withdrawal occurs.

My hypothesis suggests that there is much more to the equation than culture and biology. Since the divergence in numbers is so extreme and unreliable it is strange that there has been such a strong sense of crisis regarding this issue, and that the focus has been so specific. In the next chapter, I explore the impact of ‘the lost decade’ upon the Japanese psyche, and its possible relation to the occurrence of the hikikomori- and other phenomena.

### **2.3- The lost decade- The 90s**

*“(…) the crisis is having a considerable impact on the psychology of ordinary Japanese people. They had been accustomed to steadily increasing prosperity and the international respect generated by the successes of their politico-economic model. Now, however, they were coming to wonder whether attitudes and ways of doing things that had been central to their lives and outlook over several decades were still appropriate to the disturbingly unstable world in which they now found themselves.”*

(Yoneyama 1999: xiii)

The collapse of the economic bubble in 1990 marks the beginning of the so- called *ushinawareta junen* or [lost decade] in English. Although the financial crisis with its bankruptcies, increasing unemployment and plunging yen is an important factor in which to

understand the recession, I feel that to capture the essence of the alleged moral breakdown and sense of crisis that manifested in this decade; one has to look at how peoples responds to large isolated events contributed to the spread of a crisis mood that maybe even consists in today's Japan.

I believe that the lost decade is suited as a backdrop for the emergence of various labels for people that diverge from accepted social norms. Some argue that discourse helped manufacture a "crisis" during the 90s. *"The economic turmoil of the 1990s has often been cast as both the cause and the effect of the sudden malfunction of the "Japanese system," which allegedly encompasses not only politics and economics but also the nation's social and cultural organizations that took shape in the process of its modernization"* (Yoda 2006:16-17). This remark suggests that this particular decade has had a large impact on major forces in modern Japanese society.

The collapse of the 'miracle economy' happened gradually and can be seen as the starting point for everything that went wrong during the decade. The collapse combined with a corruption scandal (the recruit scandal: insider trading and corruption) made ruling political party LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) lose their power for the first time in 38 years. They lost election to the JRP (Japan Renewal Party), which in turn was torn by their own infrastructure and disagreements. LDP's time away from power was short; they took it back in 1996. During this time, however there were two major incidents which were not handled well by the ruling politicians and "the system" in general.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1995 disaster struck in the form of The Great Hanshin Earthquake. The casualties and material damages were of enormous proportions. The Government was criticized for their lack of initiative and stubbornness, as they were slow to send help and accept foreign aide. The Government therefore lost its credibility and trust among the Japanese public. Some suggest that this created an opportunity for Japanese to challenge the existing system: *"Only after the earthquake did it become permissible, perhaps for the first time, for Japanese to openly criticize the rigidity and opaque decision-making of their bureaucrats."* (Zielenziger 2006:46) The Governments handling of the earthquake has been used to point out the lack of crisis management in the case of emergencies in Japan (Naito, 2000).

The first part of the 90s was characterized by the economic calamity and scandal mentioned above. Economic concerns and distrust towards politicians among the public were soon to be replaced or accompanied by a more emotional response: fear.

On March 20 1995- two months after the earthquake, Japan experienced a domestic terrorist attack motivated by religious fanaticism. Sarin gas<sup>15</sup> was released on several lines of the Tokyo Metro in five carefully planned attacks by the new religious movement *Aum Shinrikyo*. Twelve people died, fifty were severely injured and nearly thousand others suffered some minor injuries like temporary loss of vision and headaches. The effect of the terror had a wide impact on the Japanese society. Naturally fear of cults became more widespread, and measures to cope with terror attacks became an issue.

Several authors and filmmakers have used the theme of cultists and terror in their work. Juzo Itami, for example, used the theme in his last production: *Marutai no onna* [Woman of the Police Protection Program] from 1997. Haruki Murakami wrote a book where he interviewed victims and members of Aum. The incident made people further question a society that had bred such an extremist group, and at the same time, it was a theme that spurred great fascination, fear and disgust.

In 1997 another gruesome incident occurred- The *Sakakibara Jiken* [The Sakakibara incident]. It involved the murder of 11 year old Hase Jun. The victim's mutilated head was found in front of the school gates with a note stuck in the mouth introducing the alias Sakakibara Seito, the school killer. The perpetrator then continued to correspond with the media challenging the society and the school system. The school killer turned out to be a 14-year old boy, a student at the same school, referred to officially as 'Boy A'<sup>16</sup>. The killer wanted to demonstrate the connection between the lacking school system and his crime by placing the head in front of the school gates. He wanted revenge on a school system that had made him "invisible". Investigations revealed that he had previously assaulted other children in the area, and killed one of them. The court eventually found him responsible for this (Yoneyama 1999:1-3). The incident produced moral panic among the public, and affected the view people had of school and children.

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<sup>15</sup> A nerve gas classified as a weapon of mass destruction.

<sup>16</sup> The romanized version '*Shonen A*' is also used in discourse

The boy was not recognized as a socially withdrawn individual, but rather a diligent-looking and polite boy from a good family with nothing extraordinary or problematic in his background. This was the worst aspect for the adult society. The Sakakibara incident confronted the society with the realisation that their young were in a crisis not fully understood by adults and that the crisis had emerged from the core of the social system (Yoneyama 1999:5-7).

Another shocking factor was that many students seemed to empathise with the killer and not to be surprised by his crimes, and that his agenda towards the school system was to a certain extent understood by fellow students (Yoneyama 1999:3). The incident placed focus upon abusive teachers, bullying and stress in the Japanese schools. Yoneyama (1999:242) argues that because of the Sakakibara jiken, the ‘discourse on children’ has dominated the Japanese media, and that in no other time in history has the problems surrounding Japanese children been so much in focus. Not only children, but the young generation in general has preoccupied the Japanese. The ‘good kid turned bad’ problematic has also inspired the popular culture as one can see in the hyper- violent movie Battle Royale from 2000. The Sakakibara jiken became “*an incident that has been ranked with the mid-1990s Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyo gassing of the Tokyo subways in terms of its monumental status and aftereffects.*” (Arai 2006:218)

For some scholars like Kikkawa (2005) the only true crisis of the 90s was the failure of the financial system and the poor performance of Japanese corporations which led to Japan's missing of an opportunity to reform. As Osawa (2005) remarks- it is called the lost decade in terms of stagnation in structural reform and economic growth, and also social security reform. Large isolated events like the Sakakibara jiken and the sarin gas attack are not included in their description of the 1990s as a lost decade.

For the mass media however finance and reform has less value. What spurs interest is malady and chaos. In this respect, the 1990s has a special place in the history of Japan. Political scandals and gruesome incidents is nothing new in this country, but as Leheney (2006:28) points out “*(...) the disasters seemed not to occur individually but to have cascaded, feeding on one another in the public imagination. For many in Japan, the cumulative effects of the bad news generated a definitive sense of crisis, one that became a unifying theme much wider than independent discussions of what is wrong with Japanese finance, or security, or social*

*relations. By the end of the decade, the question had largely become one of what had gone wrong with Japan.”*

The famous author Haruki Murakami suggests that “*there was a marked change in the Japanese consciousness “before” and “after” these events (the Kobe earthquake and the sarin gas attack) (...) they ushered in a period of critical enquiry into the very roots of the Japanese state.*” (Murakami 2000:206) A victim of the sarin gas attack, Mr. Mitsuo Arima said in an interview with Murakami that the rapid growth of Japans economy after WW2 has caused the people of Japan to loose any sense of crisis and that material things were all that mattered (Murakami 2003:57). I argue that the events of the 90s changed this alleged apathy to the extent that crisis and a focus on the specific fears of the public became the main focus in Japanese media.

It is in this context that the discourse on hikikomori was born and developed. To properly understand the hikikomori phenomenon, I argue that it is especially important to recognize the significance of the social and historical context from which the phenomena emerged. I also suspect that leading advocates from the media and the experts’ discourses have taken advantage of the crisis mood that has prevailed since the incidents of the 90s and that this has affected the emergence of hikikomori as a social malady.

## **2.4- The birth of new labels.**

In the discourses on hikikomori it is not unusual to observe other terms or labels that are related to the phenomenon. The late 90s and early 2000 gave birth to new, or revived older labels for those who became unemployed or “irregular” employees, and children who dropped out of school. The terms have been widely used in the discourse on employment problems, and problems caused by non- attendance in schools in Japanese society. This section presents these terms to clarify why they appear in the hikikomori discourse.

The economic collapse and the following recession are often blamed for the troubles young people has had in finding a permanent job since the early 90s. Before the collapse there was a basic school-to-work transition in which newly graduated students were hired by a company and trained further to become permanent full-fledged workers. Reiko Kosugi, Research Director at the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training has noted in an article that



*“Because of the difficulty of embarking on a career later in life, the act of finding employment upon graduation was a major event, one that could determine the whole of one’s life.”*

(Kosugi, 2006) Expert Isoke (2007:7) also notes that this is a crucial stage for the hikikomori as anxiety and stress caused by not finding one's place in society at this stage could coax young people into seclusion.

The school-to-work system still remains relatively intact, but during the recession firms became more selective in the process of hiring new graduates. It is argued that this further made it more difficult to find a career for youth without specialized education or those who have less education (Kosugi, 2006). It is argued that social pressure on middleclass Japanese youth often comes in the form of cultural expectations to conform to norms and succeed in life through a prestigious education (Dziesinski 2003:17). In connection to this, the situation of Japan's economy is not to be underestimated. Recession causes insecurity among young people regarding their future in all industrialized societies and cultures. This is particularly visible today with the current economic crisis. The following labels could function as social identities for some, but for others they may be perceived as degrading. These groups are often dubbed “the lost generation”, the generation suffering from the shortcomings of post-war Japan (Rowley and Hall, 2007).

**2.4.1- NEET** stands for “Not currently engaged in Employment, Education or Training”. An increase in young Japanese who did not enter the labour market since 1993 to 2002 made the originally English term relevant in Japan around year 2000 (Kosugi, 2006). The Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare (2009:5) defines it as the “*non-labour force population aged 15-34 and not engaged in household labour or education.*” The increase of NEET in the population from 1993 (0.4 million) to 2002 (0.64 million) was notable and could explain why the term was introduced, but the number has been relatively flat since then and the latest number from 2007 displays 0.62 million people. NEET can be seen as a very wide classification of people who do not engage in activities contributing to the development of society. The hikikomori could be viewed as a sub-group, or an extreme version of NEET. It is the lack of social participation in the form of human contact that distinguishes them in the discourses. Saito (ESRI, 2005) believes that NEET over the age of 25 are almost always socially withdrawn.

**2.4.2- Parasite singles** are unmarried adults living with their parents<sup>17</sup>. Media attention appears to be focused upon the female gender as parasite singles, and Dziesinski (2004: 24) speculates if not a fair percentage of female parasite singles may actually be misclassified female hikikomori.

Parasite singles are seen as leeches not contributing to the household, and spending all their money on shopping and their own amusement. This group is amounted to more than 13 million individuals and has received much negative attention in Japanese media since the term was coined by sociologist Masahiro Yamada in 1997 and later spurred by his bestselling book *parasaito shinguru no jidai* [The era of parasite singles] (Tran, 2006; Zielenziger 2006:161). The negative attention derives from the concern of a lesser occurrence of marriages and childbirth. In a research paper on the parasite singles Mariko Tran (2006) writes that: “*They are often blamed for Japan's current social woes, including the increasingly problematic declining birth-rate.*”

From the female singles point of view: To maintain a job and still follow the traditional pattern of ‘ie’ [home, house], where household and child rearing is the woman’s responsibility, is almost impossible. As the traditional pattern is steadily breaking down and the possibilities for women are increasing, they tend to prioritize work more. To have the possibility to work and enjoy life as a single is probably a strong motivation for many, but it is also speculated that the economy has made it difficult for people to live on their own, and that living with their family is more or less of a necessary evil. It is not unusual that Japanese jokingly or bitterly refer to themselves as parasites when explaining that they still live with their parents.

### **2.4.3- Furitaa**

Previous to the unravelling of parasite singles a group called *furitaa* or *freeter*<sup>18</sup> received some critique. A furitaa is basically someone who works part- time, often holding two different jobs at the same time. Criticism was based upon concerns regarding the weakening of the system where a worker stayed loyal to his company until he retired. A system said to have contributed to the previous miracle economy. This later changed as described in one

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<sup>17</sup> The term is equivalent to the western neologism called “Twixter”.

<sup>18</sup> The word is a combination of the English word ‘free’ and the German word ‘arbeiter’.

news- article: *“Originally thought to be rebelling against Japan Inc.'s traditional seniority-based lifetime employment, it wasn't until around 2003 that freeters were recognized as having been caught up in changes in the economic structure”* (Mizumoto, 2006). This suggests that the characteristics of the focus on these labels changes according to politics and general concerns among the public.

At the time when furitaa were criticised, the collapse of the seniority-based lifetime employment system was a hot potato, but later, when ageing of society and birth rate became the “new crisis” the criticism transcended to parasite singles, NEET and hikikomori. Still, being a furitaa does not seem to be the most respected path. Last year I witnessed the introduction of new workers at a Japanese company. One of the new workers casually introduced himself as a furitaa. This made some of the full-time workers respond negatively, one of them saying *“It’s okay to be a furitaa, but stating this in a self- introduction automatically makes me not wanting to take him seriously.”* Even if the full- timers did not approve of the young mans introduction, it exemplifies that furitaa has become a social label some can identify with.

According to some, the lack of job opportunities is not the only reason for the occurrence of groups such as NEET, parasite singles and furitaa. Sociologist Shinji Miyadai (ESRI, 2005) explains the emergence of these groups as a shift in values and general change in personalities. He believes that the life circuit of high education, high income and affluent retirement that was formed in a period of high economic growth is no longer functioning and that this has made people loose hope and that living only for the moment has become a prominent value among ordinary people.

**2.4.4- Tōkōkyohi- school refusal** is a well known term in Japan and has been since the 1970s.<sup>19</sup> The ratio and number of non attendance started rising from 1991 to 2001 (Takei 2005:12) and the Sakakibara incident also contributed to increased media attention around this phenomenon. The term describes the act of refusing school, and 30 days away from school are defined as non-attendance by official standards.

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<sup>19</sup> It can also be named *futoko* in discourse.

Psychiatrist Ushio Isobe (2007:6-7) suggests that the state of *tōkōkyōhi* and *hikikomori* are similar on the outside, but differ on the inside. *Tōkōkyōhi* is unwillingness to go to school, repulsion towards the school system and studying. Among *tōkōkyōhi* individuals there is a strong resentment towards school restrictions. *Hikikomori* differs in the way that they avoid restrictions rather than resent them. They do feel uneasiness and resistance towards society, but are not able to define exactly what they do not like about it. They typically avoid or refuse human relations rather than school itself<sup>20</sup>. *Tōkōkyōhi* lasts until the end of high school where students suddenly have to make their own choices and decide whether they should pursue an academic path or a different one. This is the point where *tōkōkyōhi* in many cases eventually turn into *hikikomori*. It is important to note however that the two phenomena are closely connected in discourse. In one article it is stated that “*Most hikikomori problems develop in the mid-teens, when the pressure from Japan's exam-driven education system, begins to ratchet up.*” (McNeill, 2004)

It seems that the main difference between *hikikomori* and *tōkōkyōhi* is the refusal of school vs. the refusal of social contact. If someone refuses to go to school it is basically recognized as *tōkōkyōhi*, but if that same person withdraws further from social contacts like friends and family he/she is more likely to be classified or defined as *hikikomori*. Many of the *hikikomori* incidents I have read about started out as *tōkōkyōhi*, absence from school (Tanabe, 2000). The individuals reported that they did not feel like going to school, for which there are several reasons. Many report of *ijime*- bullying, some report of a lack of interest, or feeling that what they learned was not useful, or worth the effort.

After the Sakakibara incident there was a strong public focus on schoolchildren and juvenile crime (Ito, 2002). Criticism against *tōkōkyōhi* was based on the view that school refusers were lazy, selfish and lacked discipline. Yoneyama (1999:201) notes that there was also a “*deepseated notion that tōkōkyōhi is problematic and socially deviant behaviour undistinguishable from other forms of antisocial, delinquent behaviour.*” Such notions could easily lead to stigmatization with grave implications. One example of this was when three *tōkōkyōhi* students were wrongfully arrested for murder and kept for 22 days without evidence by the police in 1988.

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<sup>20</sup> The book Isobe has written is designed to answer questions parents might have, not to satisfy scholars. The views presented in the book resemble guidelines for parents.

## **2.5- Why are the Hikikomori considered a problem for Japan?**

Researcher Tran (2006) explains that it is in the socio- economic context where Japan struggles with declining birth rate and an ageing society in addition to the country's still fragile economy since the recession, the parasite singles serve as a source of pressing concern. The hikikomori are also within this context, but there are additional issues that give the hikikomori phenomenon an extra dimension compared to the other labels.

In the socio-political discourse in Japan, two tightly connected factors have received great attention and are probably considered *the* most threatening social problems of this century: An aging society and declining birth- rate. I believe that the discussion around these major factors has a lot to do with the strong focus on the various labels parasite single, NEET, furitaa, and hikikomori.

On a short scale, hikikomori are considered unproductive, and a possible threat to fellow citizens if one chooses to add the violent aspect of social withdrawal. In theory the hikikomori and NEET who has been unproductive and not paid taxes will become a group of people who have no accumulated pension, and are therefore a future burden to society. In general, anything that will have an impact on the already fragile Japanese economy will get the attention of Japanese politicians. And this would explain why hikikomori eventually came to be officially recognized.

All hikikomori are NEET and parasite singles, so therefore they naturally share most of the socio- economic implications. These labelled groups have of late become a source of concern for the government because of the context they are in. The recessionary decade with its unstable economy coupled with the population problematic has made it necessary for the Japanese government to view the emergence of such groups as a pressing issue in a socio- economic context (Tran, 2006). I will in the following chapter describe social and economical implications connected to the hikikomori.

### **2.5.1- Social and economic implications**

As parasite singles, hikikomori does not marry or start families. In addition, based on the characterizations we have been provided, hikikomori are much less likely than parasite

singles, which still has a social life, to meet someone to start a family with. It is suffice to say that individuals who isolate from all social contact do not contribute to the declining birth rate in any way. Without children the population continues to drop and so does the ageing of the society. The hikikomori regardless of age are viewed more or less like infants or adolescents, with less future prospect than parasite singles of becoming a full fledged member of society. Their presence at home most likely induces stress with the parents and other family members and could affect the way they in turn fulfil their roles as members of the society.

The parasite singles and tōkōkyōhi are considered a problem, the NEET are branded useless, but the hikikomori are thought useless, mentally unstable and potentially dangerous.

Krysinska (2006:1) notes that the largest numbers of hikikomori are found in the most densely populated areas of Japan according to the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. Such information, coupled with the negative media attention could be a potential source of concern for people living in these areas.

Parasite singles contribute to the economy in two major ways. They work and pay tax, and they consume. Hikikomori are in most cases pure consumers. The parents often pay for their food and other purchases. They do not pay tax, thereby not contributing to the already fragile pension system and in that manner further influence the aging dilemma in a negative way.

Saito argues that: *“There is a possibility that an aging society of socially withdrawn people will emerge in 20 or 30 years. At that time, the problem of pensions for these people who have never paid their taxes will arise”* (ESRI, 2005).

The hikikomori is said to be a middle class phenomenon as lower class families do not have the economic means to support a non-working family member (Kaneko 2006:235). Dziesinski (2008:19) elaborates on the event where rehabilitated hikikomori move down from middle class to working class as their time in isolation has left them with little academic or social development needed in order to get a middle class job. The outlook for the individual in question is positive as long as he/she can rejoin society, but in theory, if the assumed number of existing hikikomori lies near the actual number it suggests that there will be increasing downward social mobility in the future of Japan. This can be seen as a potential economic and social problem for middle class Japanese families (Kaneko 2006:235). On the other hand, if they do not recover, Japan can expect a serious labour shortage for the years to come.

These are some of the suggested immediate and long- term problems in connection with the hikikomori, and they provide a good reason for the Japanese government's further investigation into the phenomenon.

## **Chapter 3- Theories and analysis**

*Hiroyuki developed a love for cleanliness, taking 5-6 showers per day in freezing cold water (the gas was eventually cut off) even in the winter. For two and a half years he did not see his mothers face or the face of a human being for that matter. He started thinking about death again, and tried to kill himself by wrapping a towel around his neck or cut his throat with a knife. His fear of failing and ending up in a hospital instead was so strong that he could not go through with it. He then decided to try starvation as a means of suicide. He left a note to his mother that he was going to starve himself to death so she did not have to leave any more food for him. Upon seeing this on her next visit, the mother started wailing and crying out loud.*

### **3.1- Theories on Japanese society and culture**

The intention of this chapter is to provide an overview over factors that are considered unique to the Japanese culture and direct or indirect causes of hikikomori. These factors contribute significantly to the perception of hikikomori as a unique Japanese disorder. I have divided various views on how these factors contribute to hikikomori into four different categories: society as cause of hikikomori, the school system as the cause of hikikomori, Japanese parenthood as the cause of hikikomori, and individual explanations.

#### **3.1.1- Society**

A widespread stereotype is that Japan is a very conform society that suppresses individuality. Krysinska (2006:48) argues that foreign journalists “*tend to depict conformity as if it were some “unique” power that comes from within the Japanese culture, and which imposes social order by punishing those who are simply different.*” Journalists often describe conformity as a cause of hikikomori because young people unable to cope with the pressure of being conform

rather withdraws from the society. A common metaphor used to describe how the Japanese society controls individuals trying to resist conformity is “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down”.

The strong sense of conformity is usually traced back to religion. It is suggested that the characteristics of a neo- Confucian society where importance is placed upon obedience, discipline, self- inhibition and group harmony is confining and putting “collective constraints” upon the hikikomori (Zielenziger 2006:18). In the media discourse on mental disorders in Asian societies there seems to be a great deal of emphasis upon religious values. For example, Journalist Beech (2003) argues that *“in Asia's most developed countries, ordered, Confucian cultures are loath to confront mental illness. Its victims commonly endure workplace discrimination, receive scant family support and feel obliged to hide their symptoms for fear of unsettling the people around them”*.

Krysinska (2006) further argues *“Exaggeration by press (articles published outside of Japan in particular) is noticeable especially regarding the cause of conformity. Journalists insist that compliance is a way to protect oneself from the punishment, such as exclusion from the society and by the society”* (Krysinska 2006:88). This focus can be read from the media discourse, for example, when Zielenziger (2006:138) comments on the importance of networks in Japanese society where *“(...) one who abandons a network finds himself ostracized and isolated.”* He also argues that since the hikikomori are *“shunned by the school or work group from which they have withdrawn, they likely may find no other network or group willing to accept them”* (2006:142). Such focus creates an impression of Japan as a hopelessly stagnant, merciless and ruthless society that does not give people second chances.

### **3.1.2- School**

Common stereotypes portray the Japanese school- system as strict and suppressive of individual growth. Studies have indicated that the emphasis on collective thought and group orientation is stronger in Japanese schools compared to US schools (Suzuki, 2000). One stereotype also suggests that the bullying in Japanese schools is more rampant than in Western schools (Gordenker, 2003).



The pressure felt by school children in Japan is often connected to the strict, authoritarian style of education which according to some sources has been on the rise since the mid 1970s. The school refusal has been viewed as a form of ‘corporal resistance’ (Sugimoto 2003:138). There are some examples of tragic events where students have died as a result of corporate punishment during the 80s and 90s (Yoneyama 1999:11). Because of such events the education system and teachers have received much public criticism.

In a TV- documentary by ABC Australia (Youtube.com, 2007) a hikikomori in recovery states that *“I guess you could say that I lost to the pressure,”* referring to the pressure of intensive studying. The curriculum in Japanese schools has been considered very extensive. However, the school system underwent a reform in 2002. The idea was to create a more relaxed system by reducing class hours and text book studies, and thereby moving away from the uniform education system where cram school was thought necessary to achieve good grades. The main figure during the reform, a former senior official at the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry, Ken Terawaki is quoted saying *“the uniform education system was effective in producing people who could support Japan's rapid economic growth, (...) but the times have changed. We need a system that helps children establish their individuality,”* (Nakamura, 2007b).

Although the reform was concluded in 2005 public concerns about children’s failing academic performances inspired former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s office to make some new changes. An increase in bullying and disruptive classroom environments was an important incentive to execute the revisions of several education- related laws. This time the government wished to return to the uniform education system by increasing school hours, revise textbooks, and hire more school staffers to increase managerial control. (Nakamura, 2007a)

Sociologist Shinji Miyadai (ESRI, 2005) comments on the claim that relaxed education is to be blamed for the allegedly increasing youth apathy: *“the decline of academic level is being questioned, but even if cramming is restored, at the end is a phenomenon of young people who do not attend schools, get married, or become employed. The cause does not lie in cram-free education, but in the fact that they lack “the zest for living.”*” His conclusion implies that the behaviour of groups such as hikikomori, NEET and parasite singles indicate a society wide change in temperament among youth.

*Ijime* or bullying is often mentioned as cause of *tōkōkyōhi* and *hikikomori*. It is suggested that bullying in Japan is group oriented, and that the individual is harassed into conformity. In Zielenzigers (2006:52) book, psychiatrist Kosuke Yamazaki is quoted as saying that the character and frequency of bullying in Japan is more ruthless and lethal than in other societies. *“As the Japanese people share racial, clan and cultural ties, their national dogma suggests that everyone is the same and shares identical thoughts and values. This ideology makes it easier to rationalize punishing the deviant.”* An obvious referral to the homogeneity of the Japanese people and the general resistance towards individual autonomy, this statement serves as one example of the pervasiveness of *nihonjinron* theories in the experts discourse.

In another article a professor of education at the University of Tokyo, Kenji Kameguchi is interviewed. He suggests that this ‘group bullying’ is not uniquely Japanese as many might think, but rather that the response of the child that is bullied is connected to Confucian values: *“They want to be good children and not worry or disappoint their parents. This is the residual influence of old-fashioned Confucian values on modern Japanese parent-child relations.”* He also says that one of the major causes of school refusal (*tōkōkyōhi*) is bullying (Gordenker 2003). And as I mentioned in chapter 2.4.3, the state of *hikikomori* often succeeds the state of *tōkōkyōhi*. Most of the *hikikomori* interviewed in Tanabe’s (2000) book refers to incidents of *ijime* as the reason for dropping out of school.

Incidents where victims of bullying resort to violence, murder or suicide occur everywhere else as it does in Japan. We have seen numerous examples of extreme reactions to bullying in the form of retribution e.g. the Columbine High School massacre. In all societies, children have a hard time accepting themselves as a victim of bullying. Rather than Confucian values, I would suggest that this is a matter of pride. Implying that the specific characteristics of bullying in Japan are more likely to cause non- attendance and social withdrawal than in other societies is just another way of bringing *nihonjinron* theory into the discourse.

### **3.1.3- Parents**

The role of the mother is especially enhanced in the discourse. *Amae* is a noun derived from the verb *amaeru* which means to seek love and dependence from another person, traditionally a parent figure such as the mother. It has been translated as “indulgent dependency” and it is

commonly assumed that “*all Japanese social bonding is patterned after the primary mother-child experience*” (Smith and Nomi 2000). It is also assumed that the Japanese mother is overprotective and overindulgent compared to the American mother who trains her child to be independent. It is suggested that this kind of behaviour is actively encouraged in the Japanese society, while in the West it is normal to suppress dependency (Zielenziger 2006:61). Because of this, *amae* is often viewed as a cultural trait unique to Japan, and often as one of the causes of hikikomori behaviour. Dziesinski (2003:17) suggests that the family “*serves to promote the child’s tendency to stay in the safe cocoon of his room.*” The act of bringing food to the door of a secluded person is perceived as an act of overindulgence on the mother’s behalf.

The general concept of a traditional Japanese post-war family is that the father is the breadwinner and the mother takes care of the children and the house. The father is often absent because of long work-hours, while the mother is ever-present. The strong focus upon education in post-war Japan combined with the role of the mother created in the 1970s another phenomenon in Japan recognized as *kyoiku mama*, or [education mama]. This is the definition of a mother who invests a lot of effort into her son’s education. In one interview a child psychiatrist, Hiroshi Kawai describes this as a form of abuse as the parental expectations might further add to the pressure felt by many children both in school and at home (Ito 2002).

Tamaki Saito is quoted as saying that: “*In Japan, mothers and sons often have a symbiotic, co-dependent relationship. Mothers will care for their sons until they become 30 or 40 years old.*” (Rees 2002b) As I mentioned in chapter 2.4.2 middle class affluence is a factor that largely explains why social withdrawal is possible. A middle class family in Japan is able to support a non-working family member for many years, especially if it is a single child family. *Amae* that manifests in leniency is often used in the hikikomori discourse to explain why Japanese families choose to give this kind of support.

These observations give us the impression that the parent-child relationship, especially between mother and child is very close in Japan. Expert Hattori (2008:17) contests this notion by saying that in actuality the relation is very dysfunctional. “*Emotional neglect, absence of parental-child communication, and inhibition of a child’s self-expression are often common in traditional Japanese families.*” He says further that it is not uncommon that Japanese parents [*sic*] consciously or unconsciously neglect or ignore the emotional well-being of their children. This act he refers to as *mushi* which means to ignore or disregard, introducing yet

another characteristic social term in linkage to the hikikomori phenomenon. The lack of parent- child communication could be exemplified in the passive act of communicating through notes.

I assume that Hattori and other expert base information on their own clients, which is perfectly justifiable. But optimally, the experts should feel the responsibility of enhancing this fact in the discourse. It could be that some families have a very dysfunctional relationship, and it could be that some parents ignore their children, but is it correct to say that it is ‘often common’ in Japanese families or is this just another example of negative nihonjinron theorizing? And, is really the so- called symbiotic and co-dependent relationship between mother and child so much stronger in Japan? Is it not likely to think that mothers in other societies would support their children indefinitely if the circumstances demanded this of them?

#### **3.1.4- Individual**

*“Psychiatric illness is the only cause of hikikomori belonging to the Individual category. (...) although individual factors are the least commonly mentioned cause of hikikomori, the attribution of cause to mental disease is noticeable among all outlets of publications.”*

(Krysinska 2006: 61)

As I mentioned in chapter 2.1, hikikomori has often been connected to various mental disorders. One example of this ‘mentioning of mental disease’ is when a journalist for the Japan Times once again refers to the experts and notes that: *“Experts point out that sufferers often display symptoms of agoraphobia, dissociative personality disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder.”* (Shimoyachi, 2003) On the KHJ homepage it is written that *“If we cannot call this a pathology, then what should we call it?”* (KHJ, 2001a). Considering the wide occurrence of registered pathological symptoms in connection with the hikikomori phenomenon, this is a valid question and it mirrors the frustration that many parents might have towards the resentment of officially defining hikikomori as a disease.

As Krysinska (2006:61) argues, few tend to ascribe the hikikomori phenomenon to individual causes. It is interesting because some suggest that other phenomenon in Japan like burn- out, alcoholism, depression and suicide is generally viewed as *“a failure of individual will rather*

*than any reflection of wider social dysfunction*” (Zielenziger 2006:207) Blazer (2005:8) to some extent supports this view when he comments on the Japanese relationship to happiness as a fleeting experience, and that in Japan “*seeking medical help for mild to moderately severe depression was not an option.*” Zielenziger (2006:196) also suggests that in Japan it is taboo to even say the word “depression”, and that almost all antidepressant medications remain illegal and unavailable. Blazer (2005:9) indicates a change here since the pharmaceutical industry in Japan in later years has started heavy advertising for antidepressants to cure “*kokoro no kaze*” [mind-cold/a cold of the mind] which is for anything less than severe depression.

When it comes to the hikikomori phenomenon, causes beyond individual control are openly accepted as main causes. This is in sharp contrast to Blazer’s (2005:11) view on western psychiatrists’ approach to understand major depression: “*The emphasis on the individual body and brain means that the social origins of depression are, today, of little interest to psychiatrists and, perhaps, the public.*” He continues: “*This lack of interest in the social origins of depression reflects the tendency to attribute depression (and virtually all illnesses) to causes that can, in theory, be controlled by the individual or by interventions directed toward the individual. This person-specific, concrete approach undoubtedly reflects our highly individualistic society, coupled with a loss of confidence that we can effect society-wide social changes.*” (Blazer 2005:11)

According to his argument, a focus upon society over individual will help us find the social origins of all illnesses. Could it be then that the focus on culture over biology in the hikikomori discourse, despite all generalizations and stigmatizations it has resulted in, has had a useful function? It is then natural to ask if the causes I have listed above, conformity, educational pressure, *ijime* and *amae* really are the social origins of hikikomori. Or maybe it is more useful to ask if the prevalence of these cultural factors is intense enough to make people socially withdraw?

### **3.2- Analysis**

In this chapter I wish to investigate the various discourses, and analyse the contents in the socio-cultural context of post- bubble Japan.

Blazer (2005: ix) argues that society-wide epidemics are almost always caused by some change in the environment, and that if we only explore the body and mind and not the social environment we are not really looking for the cause. He further points to a process called ‘reification’<sup>21</sup> which could be explained as ‘making an idea real’. This is where psychiatrists label a person with a diagnosis, and thereby making it a ‘real disease’. The danger of reification in the case of major depression (and maybe in the case of hikikomori as well) is explained in the following manner: “*Reification numbs us to the possibility that depression can be more a signal of the emotionally toxic society in which we live than a thing in and of itself. And if the effects of this toxicity are initially expressed through depression, then depression should signal a need to better understand and improve society.*” (Blazer 2005:6)

Due to a lacking official definition, the hikikomori phenomenon has yet to be completely ‘reified’ as something ‘real’ in the same sense as major depression has and this would, according to Blazer’s argumentation, be preferable for understanding the phenomenon as it occurs in Japan. However, by not further specifying that there are levels of intensity of hikikomori behaviour and incorporating such nuances into the official definition, the citizens’, experts’ and especially media discourse has taken the opportunity to use the label in something that resembles fear mongering. In the following I wish to discuss some of the negative effects of this.

### **3.2.1- The media discourse**

The media discourse on hikikomori has been through several stages. As mentioned in the introduction various violent incidents instigated by hikikomori brought attention to the phenomenon and because of this both domestic and foreign media has tended to associate hikikomori with violence. Reporter Phil Rees noted in 2002 (a) that “*A fear of hikikomori dominated newspaper headlines*”. The hikikomori became a problem the Japanese needed to deal with, not necessarily because the young recluses were suffering, but because they were potentially dangerous to the society. Yoda (2006:43) has observed a general trend in how conservative forces within Japanese media and politics have treated youth who stumble from the “right” path: “*The denigration of wayward youths by conservatives has translated less*

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<sup>21</sup> I choose to base my understanding of the term on Blazer’s (2005:6) explanation of reification: “*To treat an abstraction as substantially existing is to reify the abstraction.*”

*into a campaign to reform them into upstanding and productive Japanese citizens than into an encouragement of public opinion that holds them responsible for their economic and social displacement.”* This has been exemplified through stigmatization and criticism towards the previously mentioned labels such as NEET and parasite singles.

One could argue that the influence of conservative forces has had a major influence on the hikikomori discourse as well since there has been an obvious stigmatization of the hikikomori and their families. As Dziesinski (2003:38) points out: *“the current usage of hikikomori borders on abuse as its use elicits confusion, worry and stigma for those considered to be hikikomori ‘victims’, and may even perpetuate the shut-in phenomenon itself by public attention on someone even remotely shy or reclusive and thus compel them to withdraw.”* A sense of social and economic crisis coupled with ignorance due to diverging numbers and poor definitions gives room for negative assumptions towards hikikomori. Also, there seems to be a trend in media of attributing rare, violent actions of disturbed individuals to all socially withdrawn, who in most cases could be more of a threat to themselves rather than society due to suicidal depression and lethargy (Watts, 2002).

Another effect of the focus on hikikomori has been the use of the hikikomori problem in a wide sense to explain negative aspects of modern Japanese society. A recent example of this is *Shutting out the Sun* by Michael Zielenziger. His book has been praised as [*sic*] a worthy successor of Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*<sup>22</sup>. This is appropriate as Zielenziger uses the same nihonjinron theorizing and sweeping generalisations as Benedict did 50 years ago in her observations of Japan. His book was published in 2006, and I would argue that it represents a culmination of all the generalisations we have seen in the international media from the emergence of the phenomenon in the late 90s up until now.

What seems to be Zielenzigers main argument is that Japan is a country where change is strongly resisted in all levels of society- politics, norms and values etc. He writes that *“To really change Japan’s social structure, to destroy its stifling hierarchies and create open lines of communication, would require the sort of revolution in values and self-assertion that has seemed beyond the nations abilities in recent decades,”* (Zielenziger 2006:284). Is the picture Zielenziger portrays of modern Japan correct?

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<sup>22</sup> The praise is that of Richard Rhodes and it is printed on the back of the hard-cover version of Zielenzigers *Shutting out the Sun*.

What the Zielenziger fails to recognize in his book is that the hikikomori of modern Japan may just represent such a revolution. The author Ryu Murakami (2000) writes in an essay that *“maybe Japan's socially withdrawn kids are a harbinger of a new way of life, one forged by the vast changes the country has undergone in recent years.”* Does not the emergence of phenomenon such as NEET, parasite singles and hikikomori suggest that the people of Japan change with the changes of its country? And does not the recognition of new social labels and social identities in society to some extent prove that the public are expecting these changes, for good or for worse?

It might be that the recent emergence of groups that are leading their life away from the expected path is what Krysinska (2006:84) refers to as a ‘mute resistance’ towards conformity and other pressures in Japanese society, but can it be proved that the pressure Japanese youth experiences is any different from what American youth, or youths from other industrialized societies feel? Is the pressure to follow social norms so exceptionally strong in Japan compared to other countries? I do not think so. But I do believe that the stigmatization and general usage of hikikomori is evidence of media and conservatives wish to constitute yet another social label for the young people of Japan to justify negative effects of social change.

### **3.2.2- Violence and stigmatization**

I want to take a recent example of stigmatization towards hikikomori from the media discourse and put it in a comparative perspective.

One of the latest incident in which crime has been linked with hikikomori is the Akihabara stabbings in 2008. 25 year old Tomohiro Kato posted several notes online in which he described fear, loneliness, anger and dissatisfactions with his life. Seven people were killed and 10 were injured (Japan Times, 2008) in Kato’s desperate attack on random people in the midst of Akihabara, where he first rammed several victims with his van and then proceeded to run around stabbing people with a survival knife.

A reporter writing for the web edition of the British newspaper the daily telegraph provides me with a good example of how media can link hikikomori with violent crimes. Although the suspect, Tomohiro Kato, is described as a lonely man it has not been reported anywhere that



he was a hikikomori. He had no problems venturing outside in daylight, Television broadcasted clips from the surveillance camera where he bought his knives and one could see Kato converse with the clerk of the store in a relaxed manner on the store's surveillance camera. He also attended work regularly. Nevertheless the author has based his article on the mystical phenomenon of hikikomori, and by linking hikikomori with the knife killings the writer can justify the morbid and disturbing title: *"Japan's recluses emerge and start killing"*. The article writer concludes that the lack of communication between the Japanese in general can be to blame: *"If they are not living together, the Japanese are also talking to each other less. And if they're communicating less, they will inevitably feel increasingly isolated. The case of Tomohiro Kato shows where that can lead."* (Ryall, 2008)

A similar way of portraying a social problem was seen in a different part of the world two years ago. When the Jokela massacre in Tuusula, Finland happened in 2007, a reporter for UK newspaper The Times, Roger Boyes, tried to analyze the incident in the context of Nordic culture. In his analysis he first points to demographic and climatologic factors: The half- light and darkness of the autumn and winter are linked with clinical depression. Long distance between school and home, and low accessibility to friends' homes limits social contact and increases isolation. In Finland, he argues, *"the high tech world has become a normal substitute for the world of human contact."* (Boyes, 2007)

In various comments to the article, Boyes was criticized for his stereotypic views of the Finns. People from Finland, or foreigners residing there did not, for the most part, recognize themselves in his descriptions. Nevertheless, the piece brought up a debate in which the question was if there was something about Finnish culture that could have caused this. Boyes argument was enhanced by a similar incident at Seinäjoki University in the city of Kauhajokki in 2008, less than a year after Jokela. This time, in a new article, Boyes (2008) again pointed to geographical distance causing youth to use social networking sites on the internet, rather than engaging traditional friendship. He specifically points to the website youtube.com where both gunmen posted video manifestos prior to the massacres. Tomohiro Kato also posted diary entries on the internet prior to the stabbings.

The incidents were also commented by a Dr. Edward Dutton for the Guardian. Dutton based his piece on various findings by researchers, and comments by ordinary Finnish citizens. This piece focused on the alleged male violence inherent in Finnish culture. Dutton (2008) points

to statistics portraying a high level of domestic violence in Finland comparatively. It is also suggested that Finland has the highest level of domestic violence in Western Europe. The author uses different quotes to suggest that the reason for the violence is the Finnish males' inability to express feelings.

Also an alleged general low self- confidence of the Finns is explained by the use of an expert: *"For Finland-expert Tarja Laine this "low self-confidence" is due to "national low self-esteem" connected to Finland's rule by Sweden, then Russia and then its heavy compliance with the Soviets, as well as the influence of pietist religious groups."* (Dutton, 2008) This is strikingly similar to hikikomori expert Yuichi Hattori's remark on inherited national distrustful temperament as a culturally and historically unique cause for social withdrawal: *"Historical records indicate the Japanese of the Middle Ages were rather similar in temperament to the English. But severe measures to suppress Christianity and control society during the Tokugawa Era resulted in a fearful and distrustful national temperament, in which self-expression almost always resulted in punishment. The fear of self-expression is true even today in neighbourhoods, companies, schools and in families."* (Hattori 2008: 17)

The example from Finland is relevant because it shows that when heinous crimes occur, media has little inhibitions when it comes to including culture as a large part of the equation, and that experts are often willing to confirm this notion in other parts of the world as well. What differs is that Japan has the convenient label of hikikomori to use as scapegoats in isolated events such as the Akihabara killings.

### **3.2.3- The experts' discourse**

Hattori's above remark brings me closer to what I find questionable in the experts' discourse. Starting with psychologist Tamaki Saito, his observations are interesting and thorough, but the mere assumption that he suggested a number of 1 million hikikomori without any factual basis or empiric evidence leaves ground for suspicion. One could argue that the psychologist effectively directed attention towards a field where expertise was limited, making himself the top authority on hikikomori. Furthermore, in Rees (2002b) article *The Missing Million*, Saito is said to believe that *"(...) the cause of the problem lies within Japanese history and society"*. Following this is the statement that *"Traditional poetry and music often celebrate the nobility of solitude. And until the mid-nineteenth century, Japan had cut itself off from the outside*

*world for 200 years.*” Whether or not this is Saito’s own remark is unclear, but it serves as an example of how experts are used in the media to produce an image of the phenomenon as something more than just an individual condition.

Yuichi Hattori is the expert whose views I have found most extreme. He has connected the hikikomori phenomenon to, in my view, far fetched theories such as historical inheritance of temperament and lack of Christian values in Japanese society. He has also estimated that at least 60% of the Japanese population suffers from hikikomori without full withdrawal symptoms (Hattori 2008:16). Despite of this he is considered one of the first and foremost experts on hikikomori and is often referred to in the media. I do believe to some extent that his personal background has had a certain influence on his views. He has lived in California for several years and is a devote Christian. He believes that the individual happiness has a low priority in Japanese life, and that the Japanese are ready to accept new biblical values that respect individual happiness (Hattori 2008:16-17; Zielenziger 2006:72). Hattori’s arguments imply that his views are part of an agenda that in my view could have affected his professionalism as a psychotherapist.

I do not wish to undermine the effort experts like Saito and Hattori have made in the field of treatment, but whatever their ultimate intentions are I feel it is necessary to question their theories as they have been so visible and relevant in the discourse. In chapter 1.4.3 I provided a discourse model describing media and experts’ discourse. It is true that media has had a great influence on general perception of hikikomori, and for that matter be classified as a discourse on its own. However, what becomes more and more apparent is that media has in turn been heavily influenced by experts. Media listen to these experts rather than official sources and filter out what they believe to have news value. It is probably naïve to think that psychiatrists like Saito and Hattori are not aware of this.

This gives the experts a unique position as they, in theory, are able to more or less decide the contents of media exposure. I have previously explained what I believe to be the reason for continuous usage of *nihonjinron* theories, and the willingness of the media to adopt these because of the focus upon crisis that occurred during the 90s. A stronger focus on mental disorders will in turn strengthen the position of psychiatrists in Japan. Zielenziger (2006:213) argues that the Japanese government does not officially recognize nonphysicians in the mental health field, and that there is a resistance in the medical establishment to calls for expanded

counselling services and psychotherapy. If this is the case, experts like Saito and Hattori has every reason to create attention around the hikikomori phenomenon.

### 3.2.4- Citizens' discourse

There is speculation in whether or not hikikomori is only a new label for tōkōkyōhi, but it is worth noting that the psychiatric discourse on tōkōkyōhi had a slightly different approach than the current psychiatric (experts') discourse on hikikomori. Psychiatrists regularly added the suffix 'shō' to the word tōkōkyōhi making 'tōkōkyōhi-shō' meaning "school refusal syndrome". This indicated that the act of refusing to go to school was an illness to be treated by experts preferably with medical treatment or confinement (Yoneyama 1999:193). The experts' discourse on hikikomori has been very inconsistent in doing this, reflecting their unwillingness or inability to conclude this as a disease. In the Citizens' discourse the picture is quite different.

Masayuki Okuyama is not a psychiatrist, but he is a spokesman for parents of hikikomori. It seems that he is very eager to define hikikomori as a pathology, a real disease and thereby receive government support for hikikomori sufferers and their families. What puts the support industry in a unique position is that they have a clearly defined mission: to rid Japan of socially withdrawn youths. Okuyama has been quoted as saying about hikikomori that *"It's a disease that can bring the nation to collapse."* (Shimoyachi, 2003) KHJ and other Non Profit Organizations established to rehabilitate hikikomori are struggling as bureaucratic restrictions on fund raising stops them from receiving tax deductible donations. Journalist McNicol (2003) argues that: *"Luckily, it's a quirk of hikikomori care that parents are often quite happy to pay the charity to help their children. After all, the other option is to support them at home indefinitely."*

One could argue if an official definition of hikikomori as a disease would aid their goal in the long term. In the short term monetary support for families, and medicalization of the individual in question could provide a great deal of relief, but will it eradicate the problem? Okuyama himself is convinced that this is a very long term problem that [sic] mirrors a larger array of social ills and the fatigue of the Japanese system (Zielenziger 2006:41). If this is the case, will not making this a pathology similar to major depression or agoraphobia limit further investigation into society as cause for hikikomori?

### 3.2.5- Official discourse

Although hikikomori has been recognized by officials, they have yet to give it a satisfying definition. *“With no rigid definition of hikikomori even by Japanese health professionals, perhaps the level of influence the media has in defining hikikomori is too substantial”* (Dziesinski 2003:39) In this sense, officials are to blame for a lot of the confusion around causes of the hikikomori phenomenon. Media has been given much freedom to define or speculate, and it is in this vacuum that a substantial amount of scientifically unfounded speculations have emerged.

David Leheney has made some interesting observations in his book *think global fear local, sex violence and anxiety in contemporary Japan*: *“There is nothing revolutionary in observing a relationship between fear and politics (...)”* and *“(...) agreements on crime lend themselves exceptionally well to deployment against people or problems already judged to be threats (...)”* (Leheney 2006:4-5) The author also points out that since 1990 due to long economic recession, insecurity about social change and declining national prestige, widespread public concerns about specific fears and local bogeymen has been widely utilized by the Japanese government. Instead of focusing on ‘transnational’ problems of seemingly less concern to the public, they use domestic problems as scapegoats to increase trust among the people and to further strengthen their authority. Leheney uses the example of child prostitutes as local scapegoats (Leheney 2006:6). I argue that this to a high degree also goes for those groups mentioned earlier: parasite singles, furitaa, NEET, tōkōkyohi and hikikomori.

As I have previously mentioned, it seems that whenever crime occurs in connection with social labels, the government chooses to give it attention. This became obvious in 2000, when the Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare organized a research group on hikikomori immediately after a murder case (Ogino 2004:121). Such events seem to force officials into accepting it as a specific threat. As the situation is now, disturbed individuals who commit horrible crimes can be put into the same category as social loners, who would never hurt anyone, as long as they both have a history of social withdrawal. One could speculate if this definition is kept due to the practicality of a wide group of scapegoats, or if it is simply because the hikikomori phenomenon is very difficult to define.

## Chapter 4- Discussion and concluding remarks

*When Hiroyuki heard his mother cry he realized that she really cared about him. From then on he started to actively try to get back into the world. He began to watch TV and read a book on how to deal with obsessive compulsive disorders which was brought to him on Christmas Eve. Six months later, a feeling of desire to meet people started to come to the surface. Then, one day he decided to wait for his mother in the hallway of the house. She flinched upon seeing him, but then started to cry out of relief. From then on he was gradually brought into the outside world by the help and support of his mother. (Tanabe 2000: 92- 109)*

### 4.1- Discussion- positive and negative effects of the hikikomori discourse

An important finding of the paper is that there are many contradictions in the discourses concerning how Japanese society is to blame for the emergence of hikikomori. Japan is often characterized as a stagnant and conservative society, and the Japanese people as slaves to social rules and norms that are deeply entrenched in the social system. In the discourse on hikikomori I have found several indications suggesting that such characterizations are invalid.

First of all, the approach of Japanese psychiatrists and experts seems healthy in the sense that there is less focus on medicalization- i.e. a heavier reliance upon drugs in treatment. It sounds like a cliché, but this author believes that in discourses related to social disorders there should be a focus upon drugs as the last solution, especially when the disorder has yet to be properly defined. The support groups have pursued various non- medical approaches to cure the hikikomori behaviour. Once help has been sought by the families of hikikomori, the support groups send the sufferers to rehabilitation centres that focus on the re-socialization and normalization through gradual exposure to interpersonal contact (Dziesinski 2008:3; Shimoyachi, 2004). The extensive media coverage of hikikomori prompted medical institutions to change their advice to parents seeking counsel for a family member who has withdrawn. Before hikikomori received any attention in the media, the standard response was to “wait and see” (Dziesinski 2003:24). Eventually clinics were established, and self-help books were published. Although some opportunists may have seen this as a chance to make money on other people’s misery, investigation and research has produced more information, more answers and more explanations.

Blazer (2005:10) argues that medicalization of major depression limits inquiry into its causes, and that medicalization comes from a shift of basis from the *stress model*- focusing mainly upon external forces, to the *diathesis model*- focusing mainly upon constitutional predisposition. The assumption of innate biological vulnerability in the case of depression implies that prevention is impossible without the use of drugs. In other words, the focus upon the individual and its biology could prevent the investigation of a pathogenic social environment as cause for widespread mental complications.

I suggest that as a direct or indirect result of generalizations, nihonjinron theorizing, a crisis mood prevailing in the mass media since the 90s and a lacklustre official definition, the discourse on hikikomori has developed into a scrutinizing approach encouraging a focus on environmental causes of hikikomori. Blazer (2005:10) argues that America and other western countries have been focusing on the diathesis model in the case of major depression. Whether intentional or not, the Japanese governments hesitation to recognize hikikomori as a pathological state may have contributed to a broader perspective as the discourse itself has had room to develop a focus based on the stress model. If the focus had been solely on the constitutional disposition of the individual from the beginning, we would probably not have seen such a varied and critical discourse in which society, economy and culture has been in focus.

As I mentioned in chapter 1.4.4, a negative effect of the focus upon culture could be interpreted from the fact that scientific studies from the fields of medical anthropology and psychopathology seem to be lacking. It has been argued that once a syndrome becomes ‘exotic’ and culture specific, interest tends to wither (Hughes 1985:5). Although lay constructs could be considered a good starting point for understanding phenomena in the context of society, further research would stagnate if researchers from various fields choose not to involve. This is a factor experts from the hikikomori discourse are well advised to consider.

What could be argued as both a positive and a negative effect of the labelling of hikikomori is the possible rise of a new social identity. A social identity, or category, has one very important function: to be able to simply explain your situation to others. Ogino (2004:129) argues that in Japan there are actually only a few categories that define healthy, young people.

Generally speaking there are only two categories- *gakusei* [student] and *shakaijin* [working man/woman] that does not carry any negative connotations. As I mentioned in chapter 2.4 Furitaa, NEET, parasite singles and *tōkōkyōhi* have all gone through specific criticism, but despite the stigmatization there are examples where young people adapt one or more of these words informally to describe their situation.

Dziesinski (2003:29) argues that because of the media influence there is an apparent tendency among many young people to adopt the identity of hikikomori to express their own aversions and stresses of Japanese daily life. Some hikikomori have stated that the label relieves them of the anxieties that there are no others like them (Ogino 2004:129). One journalist even argues that hikikomori has gained semi legitimate status in society, and that phrases like “*Saikin komotteiru?*” [Staying indoors lately?], and *puchi-* or *shumatsu hikikomori* [small- or weekend hikikomori] have entered the mainstream vocabulary of the Japanese (Shoji, 2006). Possible negative effects of such use could be that it may undermine the grave implications for the individual sufferer and his family. Moreover, as suggested by researcher Ogino (2004:128) “*the more those people dwell on their categories that they fall into or want, the harder it is for them to live in society.*” This would suggest that being categorized, or placing oneself in the category of hikikomori may actually trap the sufferer in a negative pattern since the category will tell them that this is who they are supposed to be and how they are supposed to behave.

The fact that a vigorous discourse rising from the grass- root level has caught the attention of the government suggests that the Japanese system is not as rigid and top-down as some might think, and that bottom- up processes of social change and development is possible, - even in Japan. The school reforms I mentioned in chapter 3.1.2 also suggest that the decision makers have tried to make changes directly affecting the young people of Japan. It seems that a vibrant discourse can induce change in Japanese society as it can everywhere else. One could even argue that the labelling of various phenomena creates an arena in which the public can express their concerns. Labelling or reification may have negative effects in discourse, but in this specific case one could argue that there, despite everything, have been some positive effects.



## 4.2- Concluding remarks

The emergence and recognition of groups such as hikikomori, NEET and parasite singles could indicate several things. Most obvious is it that in Japan, social and economic implications create a strong rationale for constituting a profile or a scapegoat in which fear and anxiety can be projected. The incidents of homicide done by disturbed individuals are more difficult to understand and explain, and maybe that is why the profile of hikikomori has been accepted as a culture specific phenomenon. As the definition of hikikomori is so wide and includes such a diverse group of individuals the phenomenon has become a profile or a scapegoat that generates a rationale for not only “weird” behaviour but also extreme acts of homicide. Since it is assumed that their behaviour is specific to the culture of Japan, the Japanese can identify with and to a certain extent explain it through culture. While the Japanese can identify with the cultural profiling, Westerners can in turn un- identify with the phenomenon and more easily attribute it to the exotic and “weird” society of Japan.

Hikikomori as a disorder or disease is not a unique, culture- bound Japanese phenomenon, but it could rather be described as a culturally conditioned behaviour. The cultural conditions I have spoken of are mainly attributed to society, school, parents or individual, but another condition that in my opinion is just as significant is the socio- economic state in which Japan has found itself since the collapse of the miracle economy. My argument through this paper has been that the crisis mood that spread during the 90s due to political and social upheaval can be viewed as a major condition for the public and professional recognition of hikikomori as a social malaise unique to Japan.

The question is on what basis should this phenomenon receive support and attention? Should it be as a specific Japanese malaise, or should it be separated from culture as a wide social problem among youth in general? Is it viable to nurture the concept of a disturbed *Japanese* generation in crisis, or should we rather accept that such deviant behaviour is something that can happen when new values, new beliefs and new concerns conflict with established norms and values of past generations? Kryszyska (2006:84) suggests that resistance among young Japanese today is mute and that it takes on a form of ‘retreatism’. In this sense, hikikomori behaviour could be interpreted as the ultimate form of resistance towards modern Japanese society, whether it is their intention or not.

Hikikomori is extreme social withdrawal in Japan. And as I mentioned, the behaviour can in many cases be culturally conditioned. There are factors separating social withdrawal in Japan from social withdrawal in for example America. All experience of mental disorders must be considered subjective. The sufferers have different reasons for withdrawing, and the social causes could to a certain extent be constituted by cultural traits unique to the sufferer's country, and those traits may or may not have a certain impact on the individual's reason to withdraw. However, these factors are not enough to constitute it as a Japanese culture- bound, culture specific or culturally unique disease, disorder or syndrome. One can, however view it as a unique discursive phenomenon as it is constituted by a unique range of events that has affected discourse in and on Japan at all levels.

Although some might argue that mass media has a certain responsibility in how they should present the hikikomori phenomenon, I would rather argue that the responsibility lies with the general observer. We should strive to separate crude nihonjinron generalisations from more professional observations of culture as a factor in discourse. We should also be able to view extreme and isolated acts of violence and homicide as exactly that, rather than to attribute them to the characteristics of a poorly defined group of individuals. The nature of the discourse is a fascinating social study in itself, and the various discourses have provided researchers with material that can be used to further investigate social withdrawal in contemporary society.

In this paper I have identified and analyzed discourses on the hikikomori syndrome of social withdrawal. I have argued for not only the negative, but also some of the positive effects a multi- faceted discourse have had on the practical level of finding a solution for the hikikomori problem. Hopefully it contributes to a small but growing body of research on hikikomori within sociological studies. I hope to have illuminated various segments of the hikikomori discourse that may help others to investigate further.

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## Appendix

### Direct quotes

Page 3:

全国に数十万人もいるとしたらどうでしょう (Saito 1998:4)

Page 14:

「社会的引きこもりと」は一つの症状であって、病名ではありません。

精神科医によっては「社会的引きこもり」を診断名とすべきではなく、あくまでもそれに伴ってあらわれてくる症状から診断すべきである (Saito 1998:6)

Page 31:

プレッシャに負けたって言うんですかね (Youtube.com, 2007)

Page 34:

これを病理と呼ばず、なんと表現すればよいのか？

### Glossary (Japanese- Pronunciation [Translation])

甘え- Amae [Indulgent dependency]

不登校- Futoko [Non attendance at school]

学生- Gakusei [Student]



家- Ie [Home/ household]

引きこもる- Hikikomoru [To withdraw/ retire]

心の風邪- Kokoro no kaze [mind- cold]

教育ママ- Kyouiku mama [Education mama]

ニート- Niito [NEET]

パラサイト シングル- Parasaito shinguru [Parasite single]

鎖国- Sakoku [Locked country]

島国- Shimaguni [Island country]

社会人- Syakaijin [Working man/ woman]

登校拒否- Tōkōkyohi [School refusal]

全国引きこもりKHJ親の会- Zenkoku hikikomori KHJ oya no kai [The National Assembly  
of Hikikomori Parents KHJ]失われた十年- Ushinawareta junen [The lost decade]